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OMAHA, Neb.—"And what if the estimates are wrong?" That is the question you find yourself asking, over and over again, if you come to the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command. Here the whole world balance of power is concentrated, as it were, in a single converted but still old-fashioned U.S. Army post.

The journey to Offutt Air Force Base was made to get the facts before the Senate's annual storm in a cave of winds over the next appropriations for American antiballistic missiles. And the journey raised the fairly worrying question above recorded for reasons of the utmost grimness.

In brief, the analysts of the Strategic Air Command are rather firmly convinced that the Soviet Union already has an extensive and efficient antiballistic missile system disguised as part of its antiaircraft defenses. In this matter, moreover, SAC analysts are supported by most Defense Department analysts, including the department's able chief scientist, Dr. John Foster.

It is a strange feature of our era that issues of potential life-and-death significance are quite often debated in private, in the most secret chambers of the government. In this instance, the issue of "SAM-upgrading," as the problem is called, is known to have been given nearly 30 hours of close, consecutive study by the director of Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms.

Any issue requiring that amount of desperately hard homework by a man in the position of the director of the CIA can only be an issue with potential life-and-death significance. And who on earth, outside the government's most secret chambers, has ever heard that such a problem as "SAM-upgrading" so much as exists?

But for the very reason that it has potential life-and-death significance, it is well for more people to understand the nature of the problem. The problem begins, then, with the Soviets

deployment of approximately 1,200 defense ballistic missiles of unusual size and power, which our people call "Tallinn" or "SA-5s."

As the designation "SA-5" should indicate, these Tallinn were originally classed as antiaircraft missiles, in the same series as the SA-2 and SA-3 that the Soviets have deployed in Egypt. The question whether the Tallinn really belong in this series was what engaged Director Helms' attention so many hours. ✓

THERE ARE three facts of great importance that bear upon this question. In the first place, incoming ballistic missile warheads, greatly slowed by their descent and incapable of evasive maneuver, are actually rather easier to knock down with missiles than are properly flown and equipped bombing-planes.

Secondly, the Tallinn is an exo-atmospheric missile. In other words, with a range of 100 miles, it also reaches an altitude of 100,000 feet. This is somewhat above the atmosphere in which airplanes fly. Thirdly, in most parts of the Soviet Union where Tallinn are deployed, they are duplicated, as it were, by SA-2 missiles, whose antiaircraft character is beyond dispute.

Thus the Soviets have today 1,200 missiles which can be ABMs masquerading as anti-craft missiles. This is of course in addition to the acknowledged ABMs of the type known as Galosh, deployed only around Moscow. That is by no means the end of the story, however.

The 1,200 plus-or-minus Tallinn missiles could not possibly be used as ABMs, without a complex system to give them the needed radar-targeting and radar-guidance. This is where the huge "henhouse" and "doghouse" radars come in, which the Soviets have also been deploying for some time.

These vast radars, over 100 feet high and as large in area as a couple of football fields, then, are the pernicious, like the Tallinn's

power to reach outside the atmosphere, except on one condition. That condition is that the radars are intended to be married to the Tallinn. This would make an ABM system protecting most of the other Soviet industrial centers, additional to Moscow which is protected by the Galosh system.

If this is true, as the SAC analysts believe, the upset in the balance of nuclear-strategic power is already far greater than the worst pessimists suppose outside the government's secret chambers. The untruth of the SAC analysts' conclusion is meanwhile stoutly maintained by most of the government's civilian analysts.

These are the same people who first maintained that the Soviets' giant SS-9 missiles were not aimed at our Minuteman system, and then repeatedly argued that SS-9 deployment would soon be stopped. They took five years to admit that other error, so the track record is not reassuring.

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